

No One Like Jesus: What Else Do You Need To Believe?

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Deuteronomy 31:30-32:6; Philippians 2:5-16; Matthew 12:38-45

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Matthew 12:38-45. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here. When an evil spirit comes out of a man, it goes through arid places seeking rest and does not find it. Then it says, 'I will return to the house I left.' When it arrives, it finds the house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order. Then it goes and takes with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there. And the final condition of that man is worse than the first. That is how it will be with this wicked generation.'"

Have you seen people hanging out in strange places with their phones this week, wandering aimlessly and then showing a sudden burst of excitement? They've probably been playing *Pokemon Go*. As you probably know, this mobile phone game has become a gigantic hit. It takes the premise of the long-running show *Pokemon* – that there are cute monsters around the world waiting to be caught and trained – and it brings it into the real world. Now you can find Pokemon on your phone as you stroll in your neighborhood. Many Pokemon are found at major public places, including churches. There may be a Pokemon under your pew today!

It's got people out walking and being social, which is great. But there are problems. When you're looking for a Pokemon rather than at where you're going, you can easily hurt yourself. And if you're socially unaware, you may miss social cues that you shouldn't be hunting Pokemon. Arlington Cemetery and the Holocaust Museum had to post warnings asking people not to hunt Pokemon on their grounds. When you're looking for sign of a Pokemon, you might miss a sign like "Bridge Out Ahead." We ignore those signs at our peril.

What do Pokemon have to do with Jesus' teaching today? A lot, really! Because the Pharisees' request and Jesus' reply are about whether or not we pay attention to what's right in front of us. What we are willing to see spiritually speaks to what we believe and disbelieve. Are we waiting for spiritual signs when we should be moving forward in faith? Are we so entranced with our own ideas that we miss what God has for us? That's what we'll explore today.

As you might remember, Jesus' current conversation with the Pharisees began when He freed a demon-possessed man in front of them. They couldn't deny the miracle, but they claimed that Jesus was working with the devil's power rather than the power of God. We've studied their conversation over the last few Sundays.

So this week, the conversation continues. The Pharisees start this time, saying, “Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.” It’s at this point I imagine Jesus looking around, saying, “Didn’t you just see the one I just did? Didn’t you see the twenty I did in the last city? Did I miss something?” The Pharisees could have been just clueless, like babies so impressed the first time they see Dad do a trick that they want him to do it over and over again. But the Pharisees aren’t infants, and their motivation is not from a desire to see God glorified. They are filled with doubt and disbelief.

Jesus exclaims back at them, “A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign!” This stirs up questions in our minds. Are signs bad? Should we never look for a sign or ask for one? Is it more “spiritual” to live without signs of God? Here’s the first thought today: *signs display God’s power and activity, but God doesn’t need to prove Himself to anyone.*

Jesus has been doing signs and wonders all over the place. Since we’ve studied Matthew 8-12, we’ve heard no less than 13 separate miracles! That doesn’t even count when Jesus healed all the sick in each village He travelled to. His power is evident everywhere He goes! Jesus does sign after sign after sign. He is a miracle maker!

There’s no doubt that these signs are not bad in and of themselves. They show God’s power at work in Jesus’ life and give weight to His teachings. They show Him to be the promised Messiah as predicted in prophecy. And through these works, many people come to believe that He is the chosen one, God’s own Son come to Earth to save and rescue us.

But notice this key difference: when the sick come to Jesus, they aren’t asking for a sign or a wonder. They aren’t asking for proof. They aren’t asking for Jesus’ credentials – they aren’t saying, “Where did you do your residency? How many of these kind of operations have you performed?” They came to Jesus because they were sick and in pain and they knew Jesus had the power to help them. They knew that, if He chose to help them, He could. The one time Jesus questioned someone asking for help was when the man said, “*If you can you do anything...*” The miracles that Jesus performed were proof of His power, but He didn’t do them to prove His power. He did them to help His people.

A wicked generation asks for a sign because they have no desire to give up the things they do that displease God. If God shows up right in front of them, maybe they’ll consider changing. An adulterous generation has left its first love in search of idols they think will bring more pleasure. They ask for signs because they are busy in pursuit of their own selfish passions. They have no interest in a sign that helps another person, that shows God’s power in the blessing of another’s life. They want a selfish sign, a sign for show, for proof, like a magic trick.

The problem with what the Pharisees want – and what our generation wants too, by the way – is that it’s never enough. No matter what magnificent wonder God performs, it isn’t going to change their minds. Someone who is dead set on following their own way won’t be convinced because they don’t want to be convinced. Jesus could pop up in a dream and talk to them and they would still say, “Ah, it was just indigestion.”

There is plenty of proof for a creator in our world, but we ignore those miracles because we want to do what we want. As Romans 1:18-20 says, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

God has no intention or need to prove Himself to us. He has shown us time and again that He exists. He has shown us throughout the centuries His plan to reconcile us to Himself through His Son. The reason that no sign will be given to a wicked generation is because that puts us in the place of God. The master has every right to question the servant, to make sure the servant’s up to the task. But the servant has no right to question the master. When we seek signs as proof of God’s existence – or that Christ is His Son come to save us – we again try to take the role of God, which is not ours to have.

God does still give signs. He even encourages us in our weak moments to seek His face. In Isaiah 7, King Ahaz of Judah is readied for battle because the northern kingdom of Israel is about to attack him and his people in Jerusalem. They’re scared to death. And God says, “It’s not going to happen. The northern kingdom is going to turn to nothing. Stand firm in your faith, or you will not stand at all.” God encourages Ahaz to ask for a sign to show God’s good intentions. Ahaz says, “Nope – I won’t test the LORD.” And God replies, “Will you try my patience?” Ahaz’s refusal to ask for a sign was just as much a lack of faith – a worry that God wouldn’t come through – as the Pharisees wanting to see a sign from Jesus “just to be sure.” Signs aren’t the problem. Our attitude is.

And that brings us to our next thought: *the blessed are those who believe in God and act on His word regardless of the signs they see.* The men of Ninevah and the Queen of the South will stand at the judgment and condemn Jesus’ generation. That’s pretty bizarre, isn’t it? What on earth is Jesus talking about?

He’s referencing two Old Testament-era events. During Solomon’s reign, the Queen of Sheba heard Solomon’s God-given wisdom. She travelled over a thousand miles to meet him and learn from him, and she gave him all sorts of precious gifts. She was a pagan queen; she had no reason to believe in our God, the God of Israel. Yet she took the evidence that God gave her about Solomon’s wisdom, and she honored God by responding to it.

A few hundred years later, God tells John to travel to Nineveh and warn the people to turn away from their wicked deeds. Jonah isn’t interested. The Ninevites were pagans he would be happy to see destroyed. Jonah heads the other direction, his ship is hit by a huge storm, and he’s thrown overboard. God sends a great fish to carry him back to land rather than letting him drown. He then goes to Nineveh, and they do repent. Despite not knowing the God of Israel, they listened to God’s prophet.

They all have the right to judge Jesus' generation because Jesus went to the Jews, the people of God, the people who for over a millennia had been God's chosen, who had access to the words of God and the promises of a Messiah, and they rejected Him. They had every opportunity, yet they blew it through their radical disbelief. Pagans who barely had contact with the one true God listened, while the heirs to all God's promises rejected Him. How sad!

Another biblical story confirms all this. Remember Thomas? He wouldn't believe Jesus had been resurrected until he felt the nail prints in His hands and feet. Now don't be too quick to condemn Thomas – when he sees the proof, he bows at Jesus' feet and is the first to call Jesus not just Lord but God. He gets Jesus' full divinity in a way that the others didn't. But what does Jesus' say? "Because you have seen me, Thomas, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

Our modern era wants to destroy our belief in God. It tries every angle to make it difficult to stand up and be counted as believers. With all our science and technology, we think we've got the origins of the universe tied up with a bow without having to have God in the mix. Yet there is so much we simply can't explain.

I appreciate all your prayers over the last couple of weeks as my leg has gotten stronger. It's not been a fun journey, but I know your prayers have been heard. But what amazes me is that the doctors are totally clueless as to what happened. Did I have some sort of aneurism in my leg that broke free? Did I tear something in my muscle and nick an artery? They ran every blood test they could think of, did a CT scan, nothing! They are all guessing. The official term for what happened has become "freak accident." Scientists can explain the origins of the universe but they can't explain what happened in my leg?

And the good news is, the human body fixes itself. If it didn't, I'd be dead. All these fantastic systems in our body have the capacity to heal many of the obnoxious things we do to ourselves. My air conditioner doesn't do that. Our air conditioner blew its capacitor this week. That didn't repair itself. The AC guy had to do that. And it's just another sign that God designed us and knew what He was doing.

When we trust the signs around us that God is living and working in our world, we are blessed. We can find joy in the worst situations because we know God is there. We aren't swayed back and forth waiting and wondering if God will come through. We know that whatever happens, God is good and He is working to bring us to Himself. We can be like the Ninevites and the Queen of Sheba, who were faithful to God with the light He had shown them.

Another thought for today: *God is graceful to give signs even to those who don't deserve them.* Jesus says, "The only sign you're going to get is the sign of Jonah – the Son of Man will be in the belly of the earth three days as Jonah was in the belly of the whale three days before he was restored." Some have focused on the exact wording of the saying, thinking like 21st century journalists – "Jesus wasn't in the tomb three full days and nights!" But that's silly. Jesus' audience knew what He meant; He spoke the way they spoke. Matthew included those words because they were true. Jesus lived and died and rose again three days later in Hebrew time, just as Jonah lived and was saved from a watery death after three days in the big fish.

The real point is this: God blessed the wicked, adulterous generation with the greatest sign mankind has ever seen – resurrection. Over 500 people saw the risen and resurrected Jesus, including cynics, skeptics, and hostile witnesses – most of whom eventually lost their lives sharing the news. Despite their failings, God gave proof to them that Jesus was His Son.

God is so good that He never leaves anyone without any hope of finding Him. Even in areas where His name has never been proclaimed and Jesus is unknown, He has made Himself known in the world He created. He continues to do more than that, revealing Himself in dreams and visions. He shows up in unlikely places. He does not do it because we deserve to know His goodness, but because He is good. The arms of Christ are open wide for any who come to Him. He shows Himself over and over again, extending His invitation to us and drawing us to Himself.

Are we good Christians or better Christians or worse Christians because God has or hasn't shown us some sign? No. Some of us have and some of us haven't. Some of us are willing to see things as signs that others call coincidence. It has very little to do with us. It has everything to do with God. God shows His power and might as He deems fit. He does it to glorify Himself. His glory shows us everything that is good and kind and true. He shows Himself to those who do good and those who do evil. In His rescue of the Israelites from Egypt, He showed His power to Hebrew and Egyptian alike. God will be known. And He is most known through the sign of Jonah – the sign that death cannot overcome His will.

That leads us to our final thought: *seek God and believe His signs while you can.* The ability to believe and change one's mind doesn't last forever. God gives us opportunities, and we need to respond while the chance is ripe. Jesus uses a strange story about a demon coming out a man seeking a new home. Eventually, that demon goes back to where he lived before, and the man is cleaned up but spiritually unoccupied. Then that demon goes back into that man and brings buddies. Sounds scary and more than a bit weird. What is Jesus saying?

Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees and the nation of Israel. As He's come, He's cleared out the spiritual oppression that has been upon His people. The people of Israel have the opportunity to follow after God again the right way, through Jesus as Savior and Lord. Their hardness of heart brought on by the darkness of this world has been temporarily relieved.

But guess what? If they choose poorly and reject Christ, their spiritual homes will be empty. If they aren't filled with the Holy Spirit, far more darkness and wickedness will come into their hearts than what they once had. We see that in modern Judaism. We love our Jewish friends and neighbors, but many keep ancient human rituals while rejecting the clear teachings of God. Their hearts have been darkened to Christ.

While it was true for the nation of Israel, it is true at a personal level too. We sing in our hymns that our chains have fallen off; we've been set free. We sing that there is a "quickenning ray" and our spiritual dungeon has been "filled with light." God has loosed all the bonds that we have contended with under the prince of this world. But if we reject that light, if we decide that we prefer darkness, if we refuse to leave the dungeon, eventually we will be shackled again to this world, and the chains will be all that much heavier.

So here's the whole take-home for today: God has shown Himself through signs and wonders, but not to prove His existence so much as to prove His goodness. Instead of demanding God show Himself to us, let us believe what we have already learned from those who've come before us – that God is real, that He is holy and awesome and worthy of praise, that He desires to treat us with mercy and kindness. If we see a sign or a wonder or a miracle, let's give Him glory for it. Let's not be on a spiritual Pokemon hunt where we only acknowledge what we want to see. And whether or not we see any special wonder, may we know we serve a wonderful God who has set us free from sin by His Son and His blood on the cross.